

St. Vincent de Paul aims for poverty reduction

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Written by Michael Swan, The Catholic Register

TORONTO - Affordable housing and a more streamlined, straightforward welfare system are fundamental to any hope of reducing poverty in Ontario, the St. Vincent de Paul Society informed Ontario's top bureaucrat in charge of coming up with a poverty reduction plan.

The **Ontario regional council of the St. Vincent de Paul Society** met with Tatum Wilson, senior policy advisor to London MPP Deb Matthews, Aug. 28 to go over its five-page submission to the government on how to reduce poverty. Premier Dalton McGuinty has promised a poverty reduction plan by the end of 2008 and Matthews heads up a cabinet committee charged with coming up with the plan.

The St. Vincent de Paul recommendations probably aren't much different from dozens of other submissions the special cabinet committee has gathered, said Danny Bourne, St. Vincent de Paul Toronto Central Council president. Just about all agencies that work with the poor identify housing, the minimum wage, complicated welfare rules and clawbacks as major barriers to poverty reduction.

In St. Vincent de Paul's case, its submission is based on the experience of more than 70,000 visits to the homes of poor people in 2007 and 158 years of visiting the poor in their homes in Ontario.

"A lot of the submissions they get use a lot of statistics and data," said Bourne. "But we wanted to put a human face on it — even if it reiterated a lot of what's been said."

Paula Finbow, chair of the St. Vincent de Paul advocacy committee and a regular visitor to the poor in downtown Toronto, believes Vincentians know the effects of poverty as well as anyone because they've been inside homes and talked to the poor as friends.

"We observe the poor nutrition. We observe the frustration because people can't rise above their present condition," she said. "Every time they try to rise above it there are setbacks because the government is clawing back anything they might earn, or a large percentage of it."

The welfare system is often a trap for people whose only alternative is a minimum wage job with uncertain hours, an uncertain future and no benefits. Women with children in particular face the prospect of giving up drug and dental benefits for their children if they leave welfare for a low-wage job.

"That's a moral dilemma. Should she go to work to better her lot and put her children at risk? Or should she stay at home and look after them?" asked Finbow. "She's not advancing out of poverty. Therefore, people are living lives of despair."

The St. Vincent de Paul submission on poverty reduction makes its most pointed criticism of government on housing policy.

“The current capital funding model for the provision of affordable housing is dysfunctional,” said the submission. “Virtually no housing has been built under the present arrangement.”

It’s unlikely that the province can advance far on housing or poverty reduction in general without the help of key partners in civil society and the federal government, said Bourne. The government can’t reduce poverty unless it’s a priority for voters and society as a whole, he said.

“It’s going to take some fundamental change as a society,” said Bourne. “We want to be part of that movement to change people’s attitudes, to increase people’s awareness of the issue.”

For 174 years since its founding in the slums of Paris the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has tried to change society’s attitudes to the poor through direct contact and friendship. But as its membership in North America grows increasingly elderly, the lay movement faces challenges, said Finbow.

“Our membership is getting older. We need younger people to get involved. I’m not talking about teenagers. I’m talking about people in their 20s and 30s and 40s,” she said. “We get a variety of reasons why they don’t. They’re trying to pay off their own debt.”